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Argentines Are Blase About State of Siege

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina—President Raul Alfonsin came out of Sunday's congressional elections with a solid endorsement for his tough economic austerity program and the state of siege he imposed 10 days ago to combat a wave of bombings attributed to right-wing terrorists.

Either issue could have hurt him at the polls, but the president's popularity overrode any negative effects, and his Radical Party managed to increase its majority in the lower house slightly while its main rival, the Peronists, lost seats.

The state of siege appears to have caused more concern abroad than here. It hasn't stopped the bombings, but it has brought a rash of phone calls from worried bankers overseas seeking to learn whether Mr. Alfonsin's government is in danger.

"I'm getting calls every day, especially from Europe," says a local banker. "In their countries a state of siege is a serious thing, but I remind them this is Argentina."

This being Argentina, any 30-year-old has lived two-thirds of his or her life under various states of siege, and this latest installment has been greeted with indifference largely because bankers, diplomats and the general public seem sure that neither the Alfonsin government nor its austerity plan is in danger. Argentines haven't even rushed to buy dollars for security, which would have pushed the local currency downward and threatened the anti-inflation program.

Business people's main concern isn't that terrorists pose a genuine threat, but that Mr. Alfonsin overreacted to the wave of bombings and bomb threats and thereby endangered foreign support for Argentina's economy. So far, up to 50 small bombs have exploded, all apparently timed to avoid casualties. (One passerby, however, was killed in the city of Cordoba.)

No one claims credit for the bombings, but it's widely accepted here that the terrorists are right wingers, possibly from the

police or armed forces, protesting the public trials of members of the previous military government for human-rights violations allegedly committed during the suppression of left-wing terrorists in the 1970s.

The bomb targets have been homes of retired military officers, active officers cooperating with the government and others such as an army intelligence school, political party headquarters, and an engineering school. Bogus bomb threats—more than 1,800 so far—telephoned to schools and hospitals force harassed authorities to evacuate dozens of buildings almost every day. Terrorists started the false alarms, but police estimate that two-thirds of the calls now come from students who want to duck exams and enjoy the spring weather.

"I was surprised that the government reacted with a step of this magnitude (the state of siege)," says a European diplomat. "My reading of the bombs was that they weren't that serious, but obviously the government reads them much more seriously."

In an angry speech last week, President Alfonsin warned a nationwide television audience that "... we must continue fighting for our lives. . . . There are enemies ready to attack who are desperate at seeing democracy triumph. . . . Although it seems incredibly absurd, they want to seize power."

The president's worry is that there isn't any law-enforcement agency in Argentina he can trust to round up the terrorists. "We know that two of the phone threats came from 'Battalion 601,'" says German Lopez, Mr. Alfonsin's general secretary. Battalion 601 is the army intelligence service, and Mr. Lopez says it "still has the same structure and the same men it did during the military government." The police intelligence organization, he claims, "is also infiltrated."

Such surprising accusations fly freely in Buenos Aires's charged atmosphere. Officials, newspapers and human-rights groups don't hesitate to name names even though charges aren't filed. Thus did Argentina bungle into its latest state of siege.

The story is that a group of retired and active army officers met in September with civilians and a cashiered army general, Guillermo Suarez Mason, who is wanted for human-rights abuses and stealing government funds. A loyal intelligence officer supposedly was invited to the meeting by mistake and reported that the group laid out plans to destabilize the government.

Mr. Alfonsin was persuaded of the plot's authenticity and wanted to put six of the officers and six of the civilians, including Mr. Suarez Mason, under preventive arrest. He lacked evidence, but he ordered the arrests after his minister of justice said the constitution passed in 1853 allowed the president to hold suspects 60 days without charges. He was indignant when the courts immediately declared the arrests unconstitutional. It seems his advisers had overlooked an 1860 amendment that took away the president's powers to arrest.

Suspects only can be held without charges during a state of siege, so Mr. Alfonsin was forced to declare one and suspend constitutional guarantees throughout the country just to arrest the 12 alleged plotters. "The president was pained when he had to do it," says Mr. Lopez, the president's secretary. He emphasizes that the measure won't be used to stop civilian activity, but, says Mr. Lopez, "It could last a long time."

He claims Mr. Alfonsin will move quickly to set up a new civilian intelligence agency. But finding trained agents to staff it will be difficult. The Radicals purged so many agents from the existing civilian agency when they took it over in 1983 that it has lost its effectiveness, says a source close to the agency. "It's anarchy there. All they've been doing is tapping telephones," he says.

But Mr. Lopez indicates that the government hopes to defuse the crisis long before its new intelligence agency is ready to go into action. The president, he says, wants to quietly give clear signals to the military that the legal proceedings against them will end when the current trial of the nine leaders of the former military regime are over by the end of the year.

This is certain to spark outrage among human-rights groups that have filed some 1,700 law suits against lower-ranking officers. But, says Mr. Lopez, "We can't continue reopening old wounds. The country has got to look forward."